

National Endowment for the Arts

TEACHER'S GUIDE



THE **BIG  
READ**



EDITH WHARTON'S

**The Age of  
Innocence**



NATIONAL  
ENDOWMENT  
FOR THE ARTS



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READ**

EDITH WHARTON'S

# **The Age of Innocence**

TEACHER'S GUIDE





NATIONAL  
ENDOWMENT  
FOR THE ARTS

A great nation  
deserves great art.



INSTITUTE of  
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The National Endowment for the Arts is a public agency dedicated to supporting excellence in the arts—both new and established—bringing the arts to all Americans, and providing leadership in arts education. Established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government, the Endowment is the nation's largest annual funder of the arts, bringing great art to all 50 states, including rural areas, inner cities, and military bases.

The Institute of Museum and Library Services is the primary source of federal support for the nation's 122,000 libraries and 17,500 museums. The Institute's mission is to create strong libraries and museums that connect people to information and ideas. The Institute works at the national level and in coordination with state and local organizations to sustain heritage, culture, and knowledge; enhance learning and innovation; and support professional development.

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**“Does no one want to know the truth  
here, Mr. Archer? The real loneliness is  
living among all these kind people who  
only ask one to pretend!”**

—ELLEN OLENSKA  
in *The Age of Innocence*







## Introduction

Welcome to The Big Read, a major initiative from the National Endowment for the Arts designed to revitalize the role of literary reading in American culture. The Big Read hopes to unite communities through great literature, as well as inspire students to become life-long readers.

This Big Read Teacher's Guide contains ten lessons to lead you through Edith Wharton's classic novel, *The Age of Innocence*. Each lesson has four sections: a focus topic, discussion activities, writing exercises, and homework assignments. In addition, we have provided capstone projects and suggested essay topics, as well as handouts with more background information about the novel, the historical period, and the author. All lessons dovetail with the state language arts standards required in the fiction genre.

The Big Read teaching materials also include a CD. Packed with interviews, commentaries, and excerpts from the novel, The Big Read CD presents first-hand accounts of why Wharton's novel remains so compelling eight decades after its initial publication. Some of America's most celebrated writers, scholars, and actors have volunteered their time to make Big Read CDs exciting additions to the classroom.

Finally, The Big Read Reader's Guide deepens your exploration with interviews, booklists, timelines, and historical information. We hope this guide and syllabus allow you to have fun with your students while introducing them to the work of a great American author.

From the NEA, we wish you an exciting and productive school year.

Dana Gioia  
Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts

# Suggested Teaching Schedule

## 1

### Day One

FOCUS: Biography

Activities: Listen to The Big Read CD. Have students write an essay describing how the novel might end.

Homework: Chapters 1–5 (pp. 3–32). \*  
Read Handout One.

## 2

### Day Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Activities: Read Handout Two. Have students choose a work of art (book, play, or painting) and create a dramatic opening scene for a memoir by relating his or her life to this work.

Homework: Chapters 6–9 (pp. 32–60).

## 3

### Day Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

Activities: Analyze a passage with a close reading. Have students write about an example of Newland's flawed perception, and about something they think he may get wrong in the future.

Homework: Chapters 10–13 (pp. 60–90).

## 4

### Day Four

FOCUS: Characters

Activities: Discuss the characters of May Welland, Julius Beaufort, and Ellen Olenska.

Homework: Chapters 14–17 (pp. 91–122).

## 5

### Day Five

FOCUS: Wharton's Writing Style

Activities: Consider the ways Wharton's ideas from *The Writing of Fiction* are applied in *The Age of Innocence*.

Homework: Chapters 18–21 (pp. 122–162).

\* Page numbers refer to the 1999 Modern Library edition of *The Age of Innocence*.



## 6

### Day Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Activities: Analyze the symbolism of flowers and archery.

Homework: Chapters 22–25 (pp. 163–190).

## 7

### Day Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Activities: Re-examine the characters of Newland Archer, Ellen Olenska, and Julius Beaufort.

Homework: Chapters 26–30 (pp. 190–225).

## 8

### Day Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

Activities: Discuss the major turning points in the novel. Student will write about two instances when Wharton uses flashbacks or foreshadowing to propel the plot.

Homework: Chapters 31–33 (pp. 225–256).

## 9

### Day Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Activities: Discuss the theme of innocence. Ask students to propose other important themes in the novel.

Homework: Chapter 34 (pp. 256–270) and Handout Three. Students should begin working on essays.

## 10

### Day Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Activities: Explore the qualities of a great novel.

Homework: Work on essays.

## Lesson One

### FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

*The Age of Innocence* (1920) analyzes the tightly structured society of New York in the years after the Civil War, during Edith Wharton's childhood. In her 1934 memoir, *A Backward Glance*, Wharton reflected that after the devastation of World War I, she "found a momentary escape in going back to [her] childish memories of a long-vanished America" while writing her Pulitzer-prize winning novel.

In many ways, Edith Wharton had a difficult childhood. She had two principal motivations: to learn and to look pretty. She viewed herself as the ugliest member of the family. Her two older brothers teased her for her red hair and large hands. She received the ordinary education for girls of her class—French, German, music, and drawing—but she longed for a tutor or a first-rate teacher. Most of her reading was done on her own, in her father's well-stocked library. At nine, she nearly died from typhoid fever, an experience that led to chronic fears. When she looked back as an adult, she said her father's copy of Washington Irving's *Alhambra* (1832) fueled her desire to tell stories.



### Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read CD. Have students take notes as they listen. Ask them to present the three most important points they learned from the CD.

Copy the following essays from the Reader's Guide: "Edith Wharton," "Divorce in *The Age of Innocence*," "Wharton and Her Other Works," as well as Handout One from this Teacher's Guide. Divide the class into groups, and assign one essay to each group. After reading and discussing the essays, each group will present what it learned.



### Writing Exercise

Read the novel's opening three paragraphs aloud to your students. Wharton's memoir reveals a clue to her fiction: "My last page is always latent in my first; but the intervening windings of the way become clear only as I write." Based on this knowledge and the first page, ask your students to imagine and then write the novel's ending.



### Homework

Read Chapters 1–5 (pp. 3–32). In *The Age of Innocence*, a social code is often not communicated verbally. "Arbitrary signs" are given, usually through a look, a gesture, or even silence. Ask students to look for three examples of this in Chapters 1–5. They should list social customs that exist in their world of dating and friendship and identify any similarities.



## Lesson Two

### FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

*The Age of Innocence* is rife with literary and artistic references, including novels, poetry, plays, opera, music, and paintings. Writers often refer to other works of art as a way to add a deeper layer that highlights or explains some of the events, emotions, or characters within the work. Edith Wharton's writing style is especially rich in these moments, because she deliberately draws parallels between these allusions and her characters' actions. Ask your students to pay attention to these artistic references as they read the novel. (A worthwhile activity may be for students to pair up and research one such allusion's relevance to the novel's plot or character development.)

Allusions to opera are among the most important in the novel. The novel opens and resolves at the opera. The Faust story and Gounod's *Faust* (1859) provide a key to understanding it. If you wish to provide a more in-depth introduction to opera for your students, you may find the National Endowment for the Arts' educational resources for "Great American Voices" helpful. Materials may be downloaded here:

<http://www.nea.gov/national/GAV/index.html>

### ?? Discussion Activities

Have students read Handout Two. Charles Francois Gounod's *Faust* premiered on March 19, 1859. Find a CD or DVD of Gounod's *Faust* and play the "M'ama" aria for your students. If this is difficult to find, you may want to play the opening scenes of Martin Scorsese's 1993 film, *The Age of Innocence*, so they can hear a few parts of the song.

### Writing Exercise

Ask students to create a dramatic opening scene for their memoir by relating their life to a work of art—a painting, song, movie, sculpture, book, or dance. Have them mimic Wharton's opening opera scene by using specific details to help readers visualize the scene.

### Homework

Read Chapters 6–9 (pp. 32–60). The novel is told from the point of view of Newland Archer. Have students find three passages that describe Newland's thoughts about his upcoming wedding to May Welland, with at least one from the beginning of Chapter 6. What does he think his marriage will be like?



## Lesson Three

### FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third-person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters’ thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

*The Age of Innocence* is told by an omniscient, subjective narrator, who tells the story entirely from the point of view of Newland Archer. In order to understand *The Age of Innocence*, students must understand Newland’s personality and motivations. Although he is a sympathetic character, he is repeatedly fallible and has a flawed view of himself.



### Discussion Activities

Divide the class into groups, and give each one of the following passages to analyze as a close reading. Ask students to answer the following questions: What does the passage reveal about Newland’s view of himself? What does it tell us about his view of his society? What does it state or imply about his view of May and Ellen?

He had dawdled over his cigar because he was at heart a dilettante, and thinking over a pleasure to come often gave him a subtler satisfaction than its realization. This was especially the case when the pleasure was a delicate one (p. 4).

In matters intellectual and artistic Newland Archer felt himself distinctly the superior of these chosen specimens of old New York gentility; he had probably read more, thought more, and even seen a good deal more of the world, than any other man of the number (p. 7).

Few things seemed to Newland Archer more awful than an offense against ‘Taste,’ that far-off divinity of whom ‘Form’ was the mere visible representative and vicegerent (p. 12).

He returned discouraged by the thought that all this frankness and innocence were only an artificial product. Untrained human nature was not frank and innocent, it was full of the twists and defenses of an instinctive guile (p. 34).



### Writing Exercise

Building on the close reading, provide one example of Newland’s flawed perception, and one example of something you suspect he may get wrong in the future.



### Homework

Read Chapters 10–13 (pp. 60–90).

## Lesson Four

### FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.



### Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Aside from Newland Archer, there are three main characters in *The Age of Innocence*: May Welland, Ellen Olenska, and Julius Beaufort. Divide your class into groups, giving each group one character to write about and discuss. At the end of class have one member from each group “teach” the whole class about its group's character.

#### **May Welland: the fiancée of Newland Archer**

May Welland seems to be a naïve, wealthy New Yorker who is passively excited about her upcoming marriage to Newland. As the novel progresses, May becomes increasingly more complex.

- Why is May reluctant to move up her engagement to Newland?
- At the end of Book One, Chapter 13, May writes Newland a letter, asking him to spend time with Ellen. Why might she do this?

#### **Julius Beaufort: the mysterious, rich banker**

Despite the appearance of “insider” status, Julius Beaufort remains an outsider to fashionable New York. His marriage to the lovely Regina gives him access to a society otherwise closed to him.

- Why do you think Julius and Ellen become friends so quickly? Why does their relationship evoke so much controversy among the family?
- Why does Newland hate Julius Beaufort so much?

#### **Ellen Olenska: the cousin of May Welland**

The Countess Ellen Olenska was born Ellen Mingott. Ellen eventually marries the Polish Count Olenski, a bad match according to fashionable New York.

- How does Ellen's childhood, described in Chapter 8, inform your perspective of her as an adult?
- Why does Newland want to protect Ellen from Beaufort? Does she desire this protection?



### Homework

Read Chapters 14–17 (pp. 91–122). Ask students to write down three characteristics of Wharton's writing style.



## Lesson Five

### FOCUS: Wharton's Writing Style

Edith Wharton's writing style may be difficult for some students to decipher, but a little background information may help them see a deeper layer to her fiction. Wharton's first published book as an adult was *The Decoration of Houses* (1897) co-written with Ogden Codman, Jr. Since this work prompted a serious reconsideration of interior design, it comes as no surprise that houses, rooms, furniture, and fabrics are described in great detail in her fiction.

In her 1925 collection of essays, *The Writing of Fiction*, Wharton articulates several principles for future writers and students of literature:

The impression produced by a landscape, a street or a house should always, to the novelist, be an event in the history of a soul, and the use of the 'descriptive passage,' and its style should be determined by the fact that it must depict only what the intelligence concerned would have noticed, and always in terms within the register of that intelligence (from "Constructing a Novel", Part IV in *The Writing of Fiction*).



### Discussion Activities

Divide your class into groups, looking for memorable examples of the citation above. Discuss a descriptive passage that may reflect "an event in the history of a soul." Here are two examples:

- Chapter 1—The novel's opening scene communicates more about its characters than we may notice. Although the narrator does not directly tell us about each character's attributes, what do we learn through the descriptions?
- Chapter 9—The "shadowy charm" of Ellen's home brings Newland a "sense of adventure" (pp. 52–53). Ask your students to pay attention to the furniture, colors, artwork, and décor. Ellen does not decorate her home based on the fashions of New York, but according to her own tastes. How is Ellen's home a reflection of herself?



### Writing Exercise

In Chapter 13 Newland compares his relationship with Ellen to a scene from the play *The Shaughraun*. The narrator asks: "Wherein, then, lay the resemblance that made the young man's heart beat with a kind of retrospective excitement?" (p. 86). Ask students to write a short essay discussing how the theater might reflect Newland's emotional state.



### Homework

Chapters 18–21 (pp. 122–162). Ask students to consider, based on today's lesson, how the details of Newland and May's wedding reflect the "history" of Newland's "soul".



## Lesson Six

### FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and reinterpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

Use this class period to analyze three major symbols in *The Age of Innocence*: flowers, eyes, and archery.

### Discussion Activities

#### Flowers

During his engagement, Newland sends lilies-of-the-valley to May. The only day he forgets is the day of his first visit to Ellen's home. Lilies-of-the-valley symbolize purity, modesty, and the return of happiness. Yellow roses, more complex, can represent jealousy, infidelity, friendship, or waning love. Do students agree with Newland that the yellow roses are "too rich, too strong, in their fiery beauty" for May (p. 60)? Note references to flowers during the play in Chapter 13 and during the wedding in Chapter 19.

#### Archery

Ask students the following questions: Why does Wharton compare May to Diana (p. 49), the beautiful virgin goddess of hunting and childbirth? In Chapter 21, how does May's success in the archery tournament relate to her becoming an Archer through marriage? How is Julius Beaufort right when he says, "that's the only kind of target she'll ever hit" (p. 157)? How is he wrong?

### Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a brief essay to explain how symbols of sight, insight, and blindness function within the novel. Why does Newland compare May to a Kentucky cave-fish, a newly discovered creature at the time, who "ceased to develop eyes" (p. 62)? In Chapter 16, Newland notes May's "eyes of such despairing clearness" when she gives him the chance to break their engagement (p. 110). Does the narrator consider Newland's judgments to be the last word?

### Homework

Read Chapters 22–25 (pp. 163–190). Ask students to consider whether Newland, Ellen, and Julius change and develop throughout the story. Have these characters learned something about themselves and adjusted their actions?

## Lesson Seven

### FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

Since the symbols discussed in Lesson 6 deal so deeply with May's character, use this lesson to focus on Newland Archer, Ellen Olenska, and Julius Beaufort.



### Discussion Activities

#### Newland Archer

Revisit the quotes about Newland from Lesson Three. Now that students have finished more than half of the novel, do they think Newland or his motivations have changed? Has marriage to May had a positive or negative effect on him? Ask students to identify some examples of Newland's impetuous actions, as well as his failure to act. One important example of the latter occurs in Chapter 21, when Newland fails to "fetch" Ellen as she gazes at the boats near her Grandmother's dock. (This scene foreshadows the novel's final chapter.)

#### Ellen Olenska

By Chapter 25, rumors continue to circulate about Ellen's marriage, desire to divorce, and her flight from Europe. Is it possible for the reader to determine the truth from the rumors? The family objects to the divorce. However, Newland hears Ellen's point of view right before his wedding in Chapter 18. What motivates her to stay married, yet not return to Europe? According to Ellen (in Chapter 23), why did she go down to the dock that day at her Grandmother's? (Her response also foreshadows the novel's final chapters.)

#### Julius Beaufort

Thus far, Beaufort may seem to function merely as a foil to Newland Archer. Both men are drawn to Ellen yet despise each other. In tonight's reading, Beaufort will become even more important to the novel's plot, as he experiences a financial fall that will affect the entire Mingott clan. To prepare for these events, consider the way the narrator has portrayed Beaufort through Chapter 25. What are his motivations? Has he developed into a three-dimensional character, or does he remain a two-dimensional foil?



### Homework

Read Chapters 26–30 (pages 190–225). Students should pay attention to how M. Rivière's conversation with Newland in Chapter 25 informs the novel's plot.



## Lesson Eight

### FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story's conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution, or denouement, in which the effects of that climactic action are presented.

The structure of *The Age of Innocence* divides sharply between Book One and Book Two. Book One often focuses on the future, especially Newland's misgivings about his upcoming wedding to May. In Book Two, we see how Newland's choice to follow through with the wedding effects Ellen's decision not to divorce Count Olenski and how her family ultimately rejects her.

### Discussion Activities

Have the class map the novel's major turning points, plots, and subplots. Students should trace the arc of the story, including rising action, climax, resolution, and the following significant events:

- Chapter 26—Beaufort's economic fall affects Ellen's fate because she is living with her aunt (Medora Manson), whose money is tied to Beaufort. Why has Ellen fallen out of "the good graces of her family" (p. 194)?
- Chapter 27—"New York was inexorable in its condemnation of business irregularities"—a viewpoint that changes Julius and Regina Beaufort's place in society (p. 200). Regina attends the opera in order to dispel some of the rumors surrounding her husband. Why else might she attend the opera?
- Chapter 30—Ultimately, Beaufort's unscrupulous financial decisions disgrace his wife, Regina. Discuss the importance of Ellen's decision to call on Regina in her grandmother's carriage (p. 225).

### Writing Exercise

Using the discussion activity, ask students to write a brief essay on two instances when Wharton uses flashbacks or foreshadowing to propel the plot. How does this contribute to the pacing of the story and the reader's experience?

### Homework

Read Chapters 31–33 (pp. 225–256). The drama of the whole novel has been building toward the dinner party in Chapter 33, when the entire Mingott clan essentially kicks Ellen Olenska out of New York. Ask students to consider why Wharton places this event at Newland and May's home, during their first hosted party. Do the events of this chapter change the reader's understanding of May Archer's "innocence"?



## Lesson Nine

### FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.

### Discussion Activities

Students should propose themes they believe to be most important to the novel. The class might examine social customs, marriage, money, justice, love, or gender. Historical context or references may also support or contradict a thematic interpretation. Explore the theme of "innocence" to begin your discussion. Students can research how writers, artists, and intellectuals might have defined this theme in 1875. Students can also examine whether this theme is defined differently in America and Europe circa 1875.

#### **Innocence**

Ask your students to discuss the complex ways innocence is defined, discussed, and defied in the novel. Innocence is related to purity, ignorance, religion, morality, social mores, and often draws out its opposites: guilt, knowledge, cynicism, and unorthodox, bohemian ways. Consider Chapter 16, when Newland reflects: "He did not want May to have that kind of innocence, the innocence that seals the mind against imagination and the heart against experience!" (p. 109).

Has Ellen lost all innocence? Is she doomed to guilt as long as she remains separated from her husband? Is Newland chosen to represent Ellen legally because of his innocence and a desire to maintain the family's moral integrity? What do we learn about May's "innocence" and adherence to social mores by the end of the novel? How does each character's development relate to whether and how they might be innocent or have lost innocence? Finally, why has Wharton titled the novel *The Age of Innocence*? By writing the novel, does she mean to imply that this age has come to a close?

### Writing Exercises

Students should identify a theme other than innocence, writing a brief essay on the way this theme develops throughout the novel. Have them select specific quotes or sections of the text that address this theme and explain how these sections may be linked to develop an interpretation of the novel.

### Homework:

Students should read Chapter 34 (pp. 256–270) and Handout Three. Outlines for essays are due at the next class.

# 10

## Lesson Ten

### FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

In *The Writing of Fiction*, Edith Wharton articulates one of her definitions of what makes a great book:

A good subject, then, must contain in itself something that sheds a light on our moral experience. If it is incapable of this expansion, this vital radiation, it remains, however showy a surface it presents, a mere irrelevant happening, a meaningless scrap of fact torn out of its context [from "In General," Part IV].

### ?? Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Write these on the board. In small groups, ask students to discuss specific books that include some of these characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *The Age of Innocence*?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Wharton create through *The Age of Innocence*? What does this novel tell us about the concerns and motivations of old-fashioned New York? Are these attributes consistent with twenty-first-century America? Why or why not?

Using Handout Three, discuss one way a literary argument can be articulated, supported, and developed. Can students find other examples of Newland's imagined reality? What other moments in Chapters 1–33 foreshadow the novel's conclusion in Chapter 34?



### Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a persuasive letter to a friend, perhaps one who does not like to read, explaining why *The Age of Innocence* is a good book. Do students feel *The Age of Innocence* succeeds according to the quote cited above (from *The Writing of Fiction*)? Why or why not? Develop an argument that explains why the novel has meaning for many people, not just a particular group.

Have students work on essays in class. Be available to assist with each essay's main argument. Have students partner to edit outlines and/or rough drafts. Provide students with the characteristics of a well-written essay.



### Homework

Continue working on essays. Students will turn in rough drafts of their essays at the next class.



# Essay Topics

The discussion activities and writing exercises in this guide provide you with possible essay topics, as do the Discussion Questions in the Reader's Guide. Advanced students can come up with their own essay topics, as long as they are specific and compelling. Other ideas for essays are provided here.

For essays, students should organize their ideas around a thesis—that is, an assertion—about the novel. This statement or thesis should be focused, with clear reasons supporting its conclusion. The thesis and supporting reasons should be backed by references to the text.

1. The narrator is an omniscient, unnamed narrator, who is not always objective. Often the narrator's ironic comments about New York are so subtly woven within the story that it may be easy to miss them. Find examples in the opening chapters where this narrator comments on New York society. Explain how the narrator contributes, by using these examples, to the construction of the story.
2. In Chapter 9, Newland considers sending May yellow roses instead of the lilies. He then sends roses to Ellen because "they did not look like [May]—there was something too rich, too strong, in their fiery beauty" (p. 60). By the novel's end, is there any sense that Newland has sent the wrong flowers to both May and Ellen? In other words, does an inaccurate view of the flowers parallel his inaccurate view of both women, especially his wife?
3. Explain the following statement in light of what happens in the novel: "Our ideas about marriage and divorce are particularly old-fashioned. Our legislation favors divorce—our social customs don't" (p. 83).
4. Newland tells Ellen that he wants to take her to a world "where we shall be simply two human beings who love each other, who are the whole life to each other; and nothing else on earth will matter" (p. 216). Does such a place exist? Do you agree with Wharton scholar Louis Auchincloss, who claims, in the introduction to the Modern Library edition of *The Age of Innocence*, "The only way that Ellen and Archer can convert their love into a thing of beauty is by renunciation" (p. xxii)?



# Capstone Projects

Teachers may consider the ways in which these activities may be linked to other Big Read community events. Most of these projects could be shared at a local library, a student assembly, or a bookstore.

1. Study Goethe's *Faust Part I* or Gounod's *Faust*. In these works, Faust is a male character. Rewrite the play or part of the opera, changing Faust into a female character. Perform parts of the revised play for an audience. Hold a panel discussion on what aesthetic choices the students made when revising the story. Discuss whether any of Wharton's female characters have Faustian qualities and whether Wharton hints at such a revision.
2. Collect a list of all the artistic works referenced in the novel. Have students find copies or recordings of these works. Create a classroom exhibit including these works, with a short description of where each work is cited in the novel, how it relates to the story, and why Wharton chose to draw on it. Have students give oral presentations on each piece of art.
3. Search the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art on its Web site ([www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)). Have students pull together a collection of images that Newland and Ellen might have viewed. Imagine they are aspiring artists who visit the museum. Include descriptive text panels detailing the images. Create a gallery show of the work and invite other classes to view your exhibit.
4. Decorate a room for Ellen, who prefers a style according to European tastes rather than New York or American trends. Pay close attention to such elements as furniture, colors, artwork, and décor, using clippings from various magazines and catalogs, original sketches, paint swatches, and samples of art. You may also wish to juxtapose the décor of this room with one that would reflect May's more conventional style.
5. By the 1930s, Paris had become the home of many expatriate American writers, including Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, e. e. cummings, and Gertrude Stein. Like Edith Wharton, Ellen Olenska leaves America for France. Imagine you are an expatriate living in France. Write letters home to a family member or friend describing your new environment. Alternately, create a journal with daily entries logging your activities. Exhibit your letters and journals at a local bookstore.
6. *The Age of Innocence* was published in 1920—not long after World War I ended, and the same year women obtained the right to vote. Conduct research on the time period and, using this information, create a timeline of the period. You may want to partner with other students and each focus on a different topic: historical, artistic, or political events.

## New York Social Customs

*The Age of Innocence* transports the reader to New York during the 1870s—a period often called “the Gilded Age.” While this world may feel foreign, a little understanding of its social customs may reveal some similarities to twenty-first-century American life, especially during a high school’s homecoming or prom. The opera of Chapter One and the ball of Chapter Three provide several examples of the “hieroglyphics” that Ellen Olenska must decipher when she returns from Europe to Old New York.

### How to Get Invited

During the Gilded Age, social classes in New York City became increasingly stratified. In the 1890s, social adviser Samuel Ward McAllister (1827–1895) and society matron Caroline Astor (1830–1908) devised “the Four Hundred,” a list comprised of a carefully selected group of upper-class families. (This number was supposedly based on how many people could fit into Mrs. Astor’s ballroom.) Money mattered, but the way a family made its fortune—and how long they had possessed it—counted most of all. In Chapter Three, Regina Beaufort’s annual ball is a direct reference to Mrs. Astor’s annual ball—considered the opening event of the social season. Although the family invites Ellen Olenska to the opera, they will not go so far as to bring her to this elite party since her compromised reputation would reflect poorly upon them.

### What to Drive

In Chapter One, three types of four-wheeled carriages are specifically mentioned. The brougham was a closed, private carriage that could seat up to four. The landau was a more spacious private carriage, and the back half of the top could be thrown back. (Compare this to a contemporary

soft-top jeep or sports car.) The coupé was a more convenient but “humbler” mode, designed for two people, with elevated seating outside for the driver. As with contemporary vehicles, the type of carriage indicated the owner’s position and wealth. Toward the end of the novel, Ellen’s compassion and courage is revealed when she drives her grandmother’s carriage to the home of a disgraced relative.

### What to Wear

A strict dress code applied to both men and women for evening engagements. Gentlemen had to change from a suit into a tuxedo in order to be “dressed” for dinner. The dress code for women applied even to the colors and textures of their dresses, so Ellen Olenska’s clothes and accessories reflect her European taste. At the opera, she unconventionally wears a diamond headdress and a dark blue velvet gown with a clasp under her bosom. This “Josephine look” or Empire waist—modeled after the empress of France—marked a sharp contrast to the plunging necklines covered by lace that American women wore.

### When to Arrive

Newland Archer has no reason to be late to the opera in Chapter One, but since “in metropolises it was ‘not the thing’ to arrive early at the Opera,” he lingers over his cigar. When Regina leaves the opera early in Chapter Three, everyone knows her ball will begin thirty minutes later. However, the rules for a dinner party are different, and because Ellen is unfamiliar with these social rites, her consistent tardiness provides one more excuse for her family’s disapproval.



## Faust and *The Age of Innocence*

In Old New York during the Gilded Age, opera was bigger than Hollywood and pro sports put together. Opera was a highly popular entertainment that also had great social prestige. No opera rivaled Charles Gounod's *Faust* (1859). When Edith Wharton set the beginning and end of *The Age of Innocence* at this opera, she knew this choice was as natural and familiar to her readers as starting a movie with a scene at a basketball game might be today. But just as a writer-director might use a cross-town game to foreshadow a story about a clash of cultures, Wharton uses Doctor Faust's bargain with the devil to set up the major themes of her novel.

In most versions Faust is a great and elderly scholar, frustrated by his inability to attain some distant goal—whether knowledge, love, or youth. He negotiates with the devil, promising his soul in return for the objects of his desire. In fact, the whole idea of selling one's soul, or simply selling out, derives from the Faust myth—and even before that—from Eve's temptation of Adam with the fruit of forbidden knowledge in the Garden of Eden.

In 1808, the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (pronounced "Gerta") created the first part of his theatrical version of the Faust legend. Goethe's *Faust* begins with a bet between God and the devil, here called Mephistopheles. God believes that the virtuous Faust will refuse the devil's temptation, but Faust takes an innocent young woman's virginity instead. Gounod's opera draws directly from Goethe's *Faust Part 1*. As Faust begins to seduce the object of his desire, the devil

recognizes that "her virtue protects her and heaven itself defends her." She succumbs to the seduction but appeals to the heavens to save her. She is redeemed, and the opera closes with Faust calling out to her to flee with him.

From its less than successful premiere in Paris in 1859, through its triumphal revival three years later and subsequent inescapability in opera houses around the world, Gounod's *Faust* indisputably became the most popular theatrical work of the nineteenth century. At a time when families might attend their opera boxes seven nights a week, and seats in the orchestra—today considered the best in the house—were for the common folk, every opera season in New York began with *Faust*. (What *The Nutcracker* is to ballet today, Gounod's *Faust* was to the opera—only all year round.)

In Gounod's *Faust*, a respected man in search of power, knowledge, and youth sells his soul to the devil—yet is somewhat redeemed through the love a good woman. In *The Age of Innocence*, an equally respected man resists temptation but ends up in an unsatisfying marriage. Ultimately, all the enticement, passion, and regret in the Faust story helps prepare readers for those same themes in *The Age of Innocence*.



## Newland Archer's Imagined World

The ending of *The Age of Innocence* may surprise a first-time reader. However, once we understand Newland Archer's character and the way Wharton foreshadows her conclusion at every turn, her acute psychological insight becomes unmistakable. In her memoir, *A Backward Glance*, Wharton reveals a clue to her fiction: "My last page is always latent in my first; but the intervening windings of the way become clear only as I write."

By the time a reader finishes *The Age of Innocence*, he or she may have forgotten an essential character trait of Newland Archer described in Chapter One: "He was at heart a dilettante, and thinking over a pleasure to come often gave him a subtler satisfaction than its realization." Here is the key to Newland's character—he is a man of imagination rather than action.

Especially after his marriage to May Welland, Newland's imaginative world becomes more vital than his real one. Before his wedding, he suspects that May's "frankness and innocence were only an artificial product." Ellen Olenska's unconventional tastes encourage Newland to see his world more accurately—and what he sees is its hypocrisy. But marriage to May quenches Newland's desire to question the rules of fashionable New York. Over time, his marriage leads him to be "absent from everything most densely real," and he compares himself to a dead man.

May cannot completely extinguish Newland's love for fiction and drama, and he often compares his life to a book he has read or a play he has seen. One example of this comes in Chapter 21, when May's grandmother tells Newland to fetch Ellen from the pier. Newland finds her standing with her back to him, far away at the pier's end. At

this moment he remembers a popular play that he had once seen on the same evening as Ellen (Chapter 13)—particularly the scene where a man says goodbye to his beloved without her knowing it. Newland gives Ellen a peculiar test: "If she doesn't turn before that sail crosses the Lime Rock light, I'll go back." Ellen doesn't turn around, and Newland returns to the house, and his life, without her.

Several scenes in the novel parallel the novel's conclusion, but perhaps this scene by the pier is the clearest example. In this "hieroglyphic world where the real thing was never said or done or even thought, but only represented by a set of arbitrary signs," the plot is usually filtered through Newland Archer's internal, psychological reflections. Since the reader only sees Old New York from Newland's point of view, those "arbitrary signs" are even more subjective, since he is often fallible, blind, or biased. His justifiable sense of superiority "in matters intellectual and artistic" doesn't extend to his view of women, least of all May and Ellen. In a way, reading the novel becomes an exercise in rereading, since, like Newland, we constantly reexamine his situation based on our growing suspicion that he has failed to grasp the truth.

# Teaching Resources

## Printed Resources

### Works of Edith Wharton

Auchincloss, Louis, ed. *Edith Wharton: Selected Poems*. New York: Library of America, 2005.

Wharton, Edith. *The Ghost Stories of Edith Wharton*. New York: Scribner's, 1973.

—. *Edith Wharton: The Collected Stories*. 2 volumes. New York: Library of America, 2001.

Wright, Sarah Bird, ed. *Edith Wharton Abroad: Selected Travel Writings, 1888–1920*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1995.

### Works about Wharton

Benstock, Shari. *No Gifts from Chance: A Biography of Edith Wharton*. New York: Scribner's, 1994.

Lee, Hermione. *Edith Wharton*. New York: Knopf, 2007.

Lewis, R. W. B. *Edith Wharton: A Biography*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.

Lewis, R. W. B. and Nancy Lewis, eds. *The Letters of Edith Wharton*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975.

Waid, Candace, ed. *The Age of Innocence: Norton Critical Edition*. New York: Norton, 2002.

Wolff, Cynthia Griffin. *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton*. 1977. New York: Perseus Books, 1994.

## Web sites

[www.edithwharton.org](http://www.edithwharton.org)

The Web site for The Mount, Edith Wharton's home.

[webtext.library.yale.edu/xml2html/beinecke.](http://webtext.library.yale.edu/xml2html/beinecke)

[wharton.nav.html](http://wharton.nav.html)

This collection at Yale University includes manuscripts and photographs reflecting the life and literary career of Edith Wharton.



# NCTE Standards

## National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Standards\*

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literary communities.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

\*This guide was developed with NCTE Standards and State Language Arts Standards in mind. Use these standards to guide and develop your application of the curriculum.



**“There are two ways of spreading light;  
to be the candle or the mirror that  
reflects it.”**

—EDITH WHARTON



**“In reality they all lived in a  
kind of hieroglyphic world,  
where the real thing was  
never said or done or even  
thought, but only represented  
by a set of arbitrary signs.”**

—EDITH WHARTON  
*from The Age of Innocence*

**NATIONAL  
ENDOWMENT  
FOR THE ARTS**



*The Big Read is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts designed to restore reading to the center of American culture. The NEA presents The Big Read in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and in cooperation with Arts Midwest.*

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